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ABSTRACT

Current definitions of three media literacies are offered from a theoretical and practical standpoint. Information literacy means that a person must be able to recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. In response to the concerns of legislators and organizations such as the American Library Association, the National Forum on Information Literacy was established in 1989 to promote the concept at the national level. Media literacy is the ability to decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms. The key organization in the United States working for this goal is Strategies for Media Literacy, but there are a number of other national and international organizations with the same purposes. Visual literacy, which may be defined as the ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images, is 25 years old as a concept, and has been promoted by a number of individuals and organizations over the years. Helping all people cope creatively with the new and exponentially expanding world of media seems to require these forms of literacy. (SLD)

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ED 363 307

# Information Literacy meets Media Literacy and Visual Literacy

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by
**Ronald E. Sutton**

*...information is expanding at a rate that is at least 200,000 times faster than that of human population...The world population has increased fifty times since 500 B.C., (from 100 million to 5.2 billion people). The global information base has, in contrast, gone from about 10,000 pages of information to 100 billion pages. By the end of the 21st century, if exponential growth continues, we could even reach 100 sextillion pages of information.*

[from ***The Globalization of Digital Information Services***, Dr. Joseph N. Pelton, Univ. of Colorado at Boulder, May 1991]

Information Literacy might be called the "new kid on the block." In 1989 the American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy issued its appropriately "informative" report on this new phenomenon. Pointing to the emergence of an **Information Age** in the twentieth century, the committee raised a number of problems that relate to this issue.

As the opening quotation illustrates, information is growing at an astounding rate. The ability to store, organize and make such information available is also expanding. Yet this information may not be accessible to all on an equal basis. Without money or an appropriate institutional connection, many may be shut away from this fragmented information base. This impacts on personal growth to stay abreast of a changing job market, effective participation in our democratic form of government, and even remaining nationally competitive in an increasingly global economy.

The task of this paper is to examine current definitions of three literacies, **Information, Media, and Visual,** and to give specific guidance to those wishing to know more about them, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint.

## INFORMATION LITERACY DEFINED

The ALA report weighs in with a first definition of this new literacy. "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (p. 1). The report goes on to address the importance of information literacy to

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individuals, businesses and citizenship. The examples given in the business sphere are especially poignant as they indicate the problems that can emerge from managing with too little information, as well as too much. Equally important, though really just a recasting of the nation's 18th century founders, is the concern that American citizens have access to information in order to run their republic. Writing in the January 1976 edition of ***Library Journal***, U.S. Representative Major R. Owens puts the issue in succinct fashion:

"Information literacy is needed to guarantee the survival of democratic institutions. All men are created equal but voters with information resources are in a position to make more intelligent decisions than citizens who are information illiterates. The application of information resources to the process of decision-making to fulfill civic responsibilities is a vital necessity." (p. 5)

## PRESENT LEARNING SITUATION INADEQUATE

The report then focuses on opportunities for the development of information literacy and locates those possibilities and responsibilities in the libraries, colleges/universities, and schools of the nation. A grim picture is painted of the present learning environment:

The quality of a college is measured by the resources for learning on the campus and the extent to which students become independent self-directed learners. And yet we found that today, about one out of every four undergraduates spends no time in the library during a normal week, and 65 % use the library four hours or less each week. The gap between the classroom and the library, reported on almost a half-century ago, still exists today (p. 6, 1986 Carnegie Report on Colleges).

The report argues convincingly that too much of today's educational process is pre-packaging information for student and consumer consumption. They point out that students carry away less than half of a lecture's content and usually forget more than half of that half in a weeks's time. What is needed is a " . . . new model of learning --- learning that is based on the information resources of the real world and learning that is active and integrated, not passive and fragmented." (*ibid.* p.7). The report stresses that what is needed is a new learning paradigm. One that ". . . would actively involve students in the process of:

- knowing when they have a need for information
- identifying information needed to address a given problem or issue
- finding needed information
- organizing the information
- using the information effectively to address the problem or issue at hand." (p.7).

## INFORMATION AGE SCHOOLS NEEDED

A description of an information age school follows and we find its

characteristics are that it is interactive; grounded in self-initiated learning; features teachers as facilitators, coaches, and guides, rather than information sources; fosters a high degree of cooperation among teachers, librarians, media resource people and instructional designers; displays assessment techniques that value process as well as product; provides community outlets for student work (such as cable television programs); and finally, the school would bristle with the ongoing display of original student/teacher projects about real issues in the real world (*ibid.* pp. 8 & 9).

The report concludes by claiming that among all the worthy calls for literacy--computer, civic, cultural, global (and one would have to assume media and visual)--information literacy is the most important. For, "Now knowledge--not minerals or agricultural products or manufactured goods--is this country's most precious commodity, and people who are information literate--who know how to acquire knowledge and use it--are America's most valuable resource" (*ibid.* p.10).

## NATIONAL FORUM FOR INFORMATION LITERACY FORMED IN 1989

Among the recommendations made by the Committee was one to establish the Coalition for Information Literacy. In response to that suggestion the National Forum on Information Literacy was established in 1989. It is an umbrella organization to promote the concept of information literacy at the national level, and to encourage the dissemination of the rationale for information literacy through publications and presentations. Initial sponsorship came from the ALA and the Forum now includes more than sixty member organizations, one of which is the International Visual Literacy Association.

The Forum is under the very capable leadership of Dr. Patricia Seen Breivik, Associate Vice President for Information Resources at Towson Sate University, (Towson, MD), and meets every three months in Washington, D.C.

The Forum has worked on a variety of projects including:

- an endorsement of selected resolutions from the 1991 White House conference on Library and Information Services;
- a public relations campaign stressing the need for lifelong-learning in the information age;
- a partnership with the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearinghouse on Information Resources, which will provide a repository for "information literacy" resources under one "electronic roof;"
- and the development, by Dr. Christina Doyle, of outcome measures for national education goals suggested by the National Forum.

The study by Dr. Doyle defined information literacy as "the ability to access, evaluate, and use information from a variety of sources." The

outcomes were that an information literate person is one who:

- Recognizes the need for information;
- Recognizes that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision-making;
- Formulates questions based on information needs;
- Identifies potential sources of information;
- Develops successful search strategies;
- Accesses sources of information including computer-based and other technologies:
- Evaluates information;
- Organizes information for practical application;
- Integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge; and
- Uses information in critical thinking and problem solving.

A Delphi panel research technique was used to pursue this issue with 57 persons representing 20 national organizations. Dr. Frank Dwyer, Dr. Priscilla Hardin, Dr. Rhonda Robinson, and Life Member Don Fork, were the IVLA members that participated.

It is interesting to note that the **Information Literacy** movement is based on a given. That given is the public library system, which, in the United States, has made information available as a public service to citizens, many of whom look to the library last, not first, for such a priceless service. The need for and importance of technologically-sophisticated, information-sharing public libraries is central to the advancement of **Information Literacy** in the 21st century.

For an up-to-date list of member organizations and additional information, write the **National Forum on Informa-tion Literacy**, c/o Dr. Patricia Senn Breivik, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. Telephone (410) 830-2498.

## MEDIA LITERACY: A NEW TERM FOR OLD CONCERNS

Media literacy is the ability to decode, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms. (the Trent Think Tank on Media Literacy, Toronto, 1989.)

Put even more simply, this term means to **understand the media.** To understand the media is to be able to use it as a source of information, entertainment, enrichment, growth, empowerment, etc. Equally important to understand the media is to use IT rather than having IT use you.

Let's look at the Mission Statement of **STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA LITERACY**, perhaps the key organization in the United States working in this area:

• STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA LITERACY (SML) is a group of media professionals, educators and parents. As producers and consumers of mass media, we are concerned about media's role as informal teachers of values, their effect on consumer behavior and their function as major sources of information.

• SML believes that when people bring critical analysis skills to the communication process, they better understand the structure, content and function of the mass media and can make informed choices about media uses. Instead of passively receiving media messages, a media literate receiver can draw from a structured set of internal responses to media information. In this way, a single media literate receiver has as much power as the senders of information to use media as a tool for understanding.

• SML expands the traditional definition of literacy to include all forms of communication in the belief that each medium delivers essential information in unique ways. By pushing the definition of literacy past print to include electronic forms of communication, visual literacy and messages embedded in popular culture venues, we can more accurately address literacy needs for a diverse, multi-lingual society. As such, media literacy is one of the cornerstones of citizenship in a democratic society. (from SML Mission Statement - undated but circa 1988-91)

The other points in the mission statement of SML discuss the nature of how one acquires this type of literacy through education, ideally from childhood to the grave. This organization is effectively and efficiently guided by Kathleen Tyner, Executive Director. The organization does workshops, issues excellent publications useful at all stages of the educational process, and is a extremely reliable source of information about Media Education in the U.S. and the world. Write for information and membership to SML, Inc. Ste. 410, 1095 Market St., San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 621-2911.

## BEYOND SML: ADDITIONAL MEDIA LITERACY GROUPS

While many of us in IVLA know Kathleen best (she attended the conference in Arizona and has featured IVLA members, such as Lynn Lacy, in her quarterly newsletter, STRATEGIES), she herself points to others at work in this field.

One such group is the **National Telemedia Council**. It began in the 1930's and was originally a response to the new medium of radio and its impact on society. They tried then, and now, for awareness, critical evaluation, and appreciation of quality programming. Perhaps best known for their **Look-Listen-Learn Project** this is obvious another source of support and guidance for teachers and consumers looking for media literacy help. Write Marieli Rowe, Ex. Dir. National Telemedia

Council, 120 E. Wilson St., Madison, WI 53703; (608) 257-7712.

Another group is the **Center for Media and Values**. They describe themselves as "The Leading Resource Center for Media Literacy Education" and their Executive Director, Elizabeth Thomas, explains what they do: "Helping people become selective and aware media users is the mission of the Center for Media and Values. It is the premise behind our award-winning quarterly, ***Media and Values***. It is the backbone of every educational resource we offer. We call it media literacy" (p. 2 Catalog of Center).

The concern here is for elementary and high school curriculums, but also for youth programs, adult education classes and community programs of all types. They offer membership, the magazine, lots of interesting materials, and under the heading of "Why Media Literacy is Important to All of Us," their catalog contains a slightly edited version of the 1982 Declaration on Media Education from UNESCO! Write 1962 S. Shenandoah, Los Angeles, CA 90034; (213) 559-2944.

## U.S. NOT THE LEADER IN MEDIA LITERACY

England has had media education for years. Our IVLA 1990 Symposium in London was undergirded by people who were involved in the Media Literacy movement in the United Kingdom. Australia also has media studies in its school curriculum. We heard about this movement in some detail a few years ago from Australian pioneer media educator/expatriate David Considine, (a former IVLA member & organizer of our Madison, Conference), who is a professor at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C.

Unfortunately, while the United States has the most mass media, it has the least amount of training in it for both students and teachers. Our neighbor to the North, Canada, has taken some steps to remedy this situation in their country. In 1987 it was decreed that all schools, grades 7-12, in Ontario Province, must teach media literacy. This has led that area to be a hot bed for the production and consumption of Media Literacy materials, conferences, and opinions. Barry Duncan is a high school teacher and the founder-President of the **Association for Media Literacy** in Ontario. Over several years a series of conferences have been held in Ontario focusing on such issues as:

- combatting "back to basics" pressure;
- trying to help educators and administrators understand the difference between teaching **through** the media and teaching **about** the media;
- dealing with budget crunches;
- finding resourceful material;
- and eternally arguing about the definition, focus and scope of media literacy.

Dr. Patricia Aufderheide, a senior editor of ***In These Times*** and my

colleague at The American University, attended the most recent conference held by the Association for Media Literacy. It took place May 13-15, 1992, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Her stimulating and cogent review of the conference was published in the September 1992 edition of ***Afterimage***. It's an excellent analysis of some of the strengths and weaknesses of the media literacy movement in its present incarnation.

For information, write The Association For Media Literacy, 40 McArthur St., Weston, Ontario M9P 3M7; (416) 394-6990.

Media Literacy is important and needed. The author has been teaching a course, Understanding Mass Media, for 20 years at American University. The course is designed to help students understand the structure and function of the various media of profit, information, persuasion, and entertainment in the United States. Our faculty want students to understand that all media is a construct, created for a purpose (primarily profit in the U.S.). When asked for a rationale for the course we were going to team teach in 1989, my previously-mentioned colleague, Patricia Aufderheide, responded with the following questions to present to our students:

- Who sets the agenda for the information we get? What's objective, what's fair, what's enough?

- What relative roles do economic, social and political forces play in shaping the context for what journalists and entertainers produce? How do regulation, history and social/moral values shape our media?

- To what extent does form dictate content? Is the medium the message in TV? Can films deliver a powerful argument without expressing it in emotional terms?

- Do mass Media shape social issues (a top-down model) or do they respond to public desire (a supply-demand model)? (Memo May 22, 1989).

These are excellent questions and can engage us at every level of discourse in the educational community. The bottom line is that the media as a force in our society and world are far to important **not** to be studied.

## √ISUAL LITERACY: 25 YEAR OLD YOUNG ADULT

In ***Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary***, (1983), the definition listed for Visual Literacy is as follows:

"visual literacy **n** (1971): the ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images (as pictures)."

There is no similar listing for media literacy or information literacy. Note the 1971 origin. Presumably this term or combination of terms just didn't exist before IVLA founder, Jack Debes, coined its use around that time. However, dictionary definitions don't really explain what the International Visual Literacy Association has been up to since it was incorporated in 1969.

Our official definition, shaped largely by the thought of pioneers Jack L. Debes and Clarence M. Williams, remains:

> • Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visual actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural, or man-made, that [are encountered] in [the] environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, [we are] able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, [we are] able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication. (Official IVLA brochure based on p. 39, Provocative Papers Series #1; ***Visual Literacy, Languaging, and Learning***, Debes/Williams).

## IN DIVERSITY THERE IS STRENGTH

What this really amounts to is a mandate to examine visuals as a language and communication system. For twenty five years the members and friends of IVLA have been doing this in the pages of the newsletter, the journal, the readings, at conferences, symposiums and regional gatherings. IVLA is a wildly diverse group. Our numbers include fine and graphic artists, scientists, photographers, researchers, film and video makers, business communication professionals, school administrators, print and electronic journalists, visual anthropologists, educational technologists, and educators at all levels. It is a fascinating if roller-coaster sort of history. The enormous repository of ideas, lots of it now being gathered safely and carefully into the Visual Literacy Collection at Arizona State University, testifies to our diversity. Of course it is this diversity that makes it difficult to define and explain what exactly our organization is all about, or what our wonderful "circus tent" of a term, **Visual Literacy**, really means.

This doesn't really bother me too much. Lack of precision and willingness to include eclectically a wide range of ideas seems a strength. For example, I describe the controlling purpose of our Visual Literacy courses (9 sections of 30 students annually) at The American University as follows:

> • To assist students in understanding visual imagery, providing a wide range of experience so they may learn to "see" in a discerning manner. To help students understand that visual literacy is the awareness of the image and sound as a series of production decisions on the part of artists and producers. To challenge students in their understanding of the social, cultural, and political context in which visual images are used to achieve a variety of goals. (Sutton course syllabus -1992)

One sees traces of the basic Visual Literacy definition here but it is adapted to a course that exists in the Arts Area of a University General Education Program taught by a group of professors from the School of Communication.

## CONCLUSION: MULTI-LITERACIES FOR A MULTI-CULTURAL WORLD

Thus, we see that **Visual Literacy** as concept and organization is 25 years old next year; **Information Literacy** as a National Forum is four years young; and **Media Literacy**? In different form the beginnings of media literacy reach back to the Payne Fund Studies of the 1930's. The concern in those early days was to guard our society, especially children and youth, from being corrupted by the evils of the newer media. Similar concerns surfaced again in the Sixties.

One of the prophets of this period was the Canadian scholar and teacher, Marshall McLuhan. He stood in the valley as the decade began and announced to all who would listen that there was a huge truck at the top of hill full of popular media and messages that was going to run over and smash our culture. For his trouble many accused him of driving the truck!

Many of us in the Media Education movement of the 60's, a movement which peaked around 1974 with 25 regional groups composing the now-defunct National Association of Media Educators [NAME], (the author was the founding Executive Secretary, 1970-73), saw media as a positive force, but worried about its ability to manipulate even those of us who enjoyed it used it and studied it. There was little in our theoretical foundation, one admittedly as shallow as other dimensions of the 60's, to shield us from the devastating effect of McLuhan's truck.

There is still little attention to theory in the current **Media Literacy** movement (c.f. Aufderheides' article in ***Afterimage***). We need to ask questions about the purpose and ultimate goal of this literacy, even as we also query exactly what those interested in furthering **Information Literacy** have in mind. So far the careful thought behind the founding statement is strong, but the basis for extension has little depth in theory and concept beyond practical applications, e.g. lifelong learning by whom, for what purpose, paid for by whom, for what reason?

**Visual Literacy** has endured some twenty five years of being defined and re-defined. That process has led to the wise stance of looseness and eclecticism. No rigid ideology here---more an accepting attitude until certain elements (such as computers) are incorporated, and others (teaching machines) are sloughed off or relegated to lesser positions of importance.

And through it all, rather than the desire to create a steamroller of a educational or political movement, a quiet, intense, dedicated, informative, band of folk have raised a concept of a new type of literacy into the consciousness of the nation (remember the dictionary). Helping all people cope creatively with the new and exponentially expanding world of media seems to require all these literacies and

maybe new ones that await us in the 21st century.

## SOURCES CONSULTED


***Final Report***, American Library Association Commission on Information Literacy, January, 1989. For single free copies write Information Literacy, ALA, 50 East Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611.

***Report to National Forum on Information Literacy***. June 12, 1992. Summary of Findings: Outcome Measures for Information Literacy Within the National Education Goals of 1990, by Dr. Christina Doyle.

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